

Seaside Resort Blues: The English Seaside in the 1930s

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ABSTRACT

In the interwar period, seaside holidays had become accessible to more people in the United Kingdom than ever before. It was not least the unapologetic hedonism of the working classes that gave places like Blackpool and Scarborough their vibrant energy. However, a notable number of English travelogues in the 1930s depict seaside resorts as overcrowded, vulgar, debilitating, and in fact un-English. During the years in which the UK faced the rising threat of fascism, the seaside became a site where ideas of Englishness, popular culture, and masculinity came under scrutiny. In my paper, I explore these ambivalent constructions of the English seaside resort, from J. B. Priestley's *English Journey* to the collection *Beside the Seaside*, in which women authors, including Yvonne Cloud and Kate O'Brian, celebrate the seaside as a catalyst of female agency. (VR)

KEYWORDS: seaside vacations, travelogues, crowds, mass tourism, Britishness, democracy, masculinity

The nineteen-twenties and thirties can be considered the Golden Age of seaside holidays. As the journalist and writer, Ivor Brown stated in 1935, "[t]he summer seaside visit is a national institution" (14). For the first time in history, recreational stays at the seaside, ranging from day trips to holidays of a week or longer, had become widely accessible to people in the United Kingdom, and the quality and diversity of the board and lodging, as well as the

recreations on offer, had increased significantly. However, the popularity of the seaside also brought along new problems, such as traffic congestion, overcrowding of the recreational sites, and pollution and health hazards as sewage was dispatched unfiltered into the sea (Walton, *British Seaside* 123). This was also the Golden Age of the cinema, and as secretaries and factory workers modeled their leisure outfits on film stars, the seaside holiday became more glamorous than ever before and after. At the same time, it came under critical scrutiny as an instance of mass consumerism, false consciousness, and the Americanization of the native English tradition. As American films and music were imported for the visitors' entertainment, seaside resorts got the blues, at least in the eyes of critics such as J. B. Priestley, who considered the "new Blackpool" effeminate and "not really English" (*English Journey* 267). This essay will examine the ambivalence found in non-fiction writings about the seaside in the nineteen-thirties, that is, in texts written after the economic depression had exacerbated the division between those who could still afford a seaside holiday, and those who could not. In travelogues such as Priestley's *English Journey* (1934), Brown's *The Heart of England* (1935), and Yvonne Cloud's edited collection, *Beside the Seaside* (1934), the seaside resort becomes the site of negotiations of individuality and collectivity, dreams and economics, performances of gender and class roles, and national identity.

Seaside holidays in the inter-war period

In her detective novel *Evil Under the Sun* (1941), Agatha Christie describes the social revolution of the holiday that had taken place by the first decades of the twentieth century: she identifies 1922 as the year "when the great cult of the Seaside for Holidays was finally established" (7). In the nineteen-twenties and thirties, great numbers of holidaymakers sought out the seaside as their preferred destination,¹ but what they did there, especially on the beach, was distinctly different from Victorian and Edwardian holiday patterns. The setting of

Christie's novel, a fictitious island off the Devon coast, is transformed from an undesirable piece of real estate into a prime location for *summer* seaside tourism, as the south-western coasts of England—and those of southern France and Italy—are “no longer thought too hot in the summer” (8), and resorts are restyled to offer the attractions now newly in demand:

A concrete causeway was laid down from the mainland to the island. ‘Walks’ and ‘Nooks’ were cut and devised all round the island. There were two tennis courts, sun-terraces leading down a little bay embellished with rafts and diving boards. The Jolly Roger Hotel, Smugglers’ Island, Leathercombe Bay, came triumphantly into being. And from June till September (with a short season at Easter) the Jolly Roger Hotel was usually packed to the attics. It was enlarged and improved in 1934 by the addition of a cocktail bar, a bigger dining room and some extra bathrooms. The prices went up. (Christie 8)

The newly created seaside resort on Smugglers’ Island provides, despite its small size, the necessary features for a new type of holiday, catering to affluent, active, pleasure-seeking visitors, rather than the valetudinarians who sought out the seaside in the nineteenth century. Holidaymakers’ activities on Smugglers’ Island include swimming, sunbathing, rowing and sailing, playing tennis and exploring caves. In addition, the refurbished hotel offers luxuries unknown to Victorian vacationers, such as en-suite bathrooms. Despite the celebratory beginning describing the attractions of the Jolly Roger Hotel, however, a sinister note soon creeps in, resonant of a widespread ambivalence towards seaside holidays in the interwar period, its popularity notwithstanding. Not only are the leisure activities themselves built into the murder plot, which is predicated on the victim’s behavior as a typical seaside

holidaymaker, but they are, from the beginning, negatively marked as part of modernity's mass consumerism.

As several historians of the British seaside have shown, the practices of seaside holidays changed in the twentieth century, and especially after the First World War: strict regimes of health and morality were replaced by a relaxed body culture, hedonism, and a general slackening of norms, including sartorial codes. The bathing machine, epitome of the regulated pursuit of health in cold seawater, went out of fashion, and municipalities gave up the segregation of bathing areas along gender lines, while swimwear became more serviceable as well as more revealing.² As John K. Walton argues, "the atmosphere of the beach changed, with the pre-war trend to relaxation and informality in bathing and bodily display becoming sharply accentuated, boosted by the vogue for sun-bathing and more generally for sport and healthy outdoor activity" (*British Seaside* 97). Two practices in particular changed the habits of the visitors, and the ambience of the beach: swimming and sunbathing. According to Jean-Didier Urbain, swimming was "the great liberator of seaside vacationing," emancipating bathers from the rigid rules of hydrotherapy (88). Sunshine, strictly shunned by the Victorians (see Richter), was completely revalued after the war, from a mark of plebeian outdoors work to a mark of social distinction:

By now, a suntan meant the lady or gentleman in question had the leisure and money to invest in expensive holidays at the Riviera. The social cachet of the sun-bronzed skin was firmly established. It was not long before the craze spread to England's holidaymakers and the sight of bodies grilling slowly in the British sun to varying degrees of success was commonplace at its seaside resorts. (Braggs and Harris 51)

Sunbathing thus not only denoted hedonistic relaxation and the display of relatively unclothed bodies, but also a cosmopolitan lifestyle dedicated to leisure—losing some of its distinction, however, as the practice filtered down to the working classes enjoying their week away from the factory. The seaside was a space in which social exclusiveness and individualism were in constant negotiation with accessibility and mass culture.

In sum, after the First World War the British seaside vacation changed in quantity as well as in quality. More people than ever could not only go to the seaside, but also enjoy regular annual holidays there (Braggs and Harris 8). The quality and diversity of accommodation improved, offering holiday residences for all budgets and tastes, from upper class hotels to camping and caravan sites (Walton, *British Seaside* 78). Growing individual mobility, including the rise in private car ownership (Braggs and Harris 9, Walton, *British Seaside* 78) and the popularity of bicycle tours (Walton 81), allowed holidaymakers to pick more remote, less popular destinations. The seaside resorts themselves, in turn, offered a wide variety of activities, from the quiet enjoyment of “unspoilt” nature in Cornwall and Wales to the raucous pleasures available at Blackpool. Going to the seaside signified, first and foremost, the pursuit of pleasure, individualism, and a break away from everyday routines. However, precisely because so many pursued these identical goals, the seaside holiday was also part of a mass experience.

This remains true even if the chosen location is rather exclusive, as that of Christie’s Jolly Roger Hotel. The hotel prices are high, allowing access only to a “better” class of guests, and the island is connected to the mainland only by a causeway—covered at high tide—so undesirable day trippers can be easily spotted and fended off. Nevertheless, even this select community inevitably becomes part of the mass culture of holidays, as the practices of distinction are revealed as standardized gestures. Sunbathing is, as Walton suggests, “an individualistic, hedonistic pursuit,” but it can be “collectively pursued when enjoyed in

serried ranks” (*British Seaside* 101). In a conversation among hotel guests, Hercule Poirot points out the exchangeability, the de-individuation of the bodies spread out on the sand: “Regard them there, lying out in rows. What are they? They are not men and women. There is nothing personal about them. They are just—bodies” (13). Stripped of the social signs of class as well as individual personality, their clothes and gestures, the sunbathers lose any distinctiveness; in Poirot’s eyes, even the distinction between men and women, and between the living and the dead disappears: the rows of bodies remind Poirot “of the Morgue in Paris” (14). In modern culture, Poirot complains, “everything is *standardized*” (14, emphasis in the original).

The tension between exclusiveness and individuality on the one hand, and mass consumerism and crowdedness on the other is, according to Kasia Boddy, a hallmark of the modern beach and a reason why the beach is dismissed in many modernist reflections. Referring to Christie’s *Evil Under the Sun*, Boddy aligns the modernist malaise regarding the beach with the superimposition of the crowd—classically connoted with the urban experience—on the idealized emptiness of the beach (25).³ Poirot links the standardization of the body on the beach with the erotic disenchantment of modernity, the overt display of the hitherto mysterious, and hence arousing, female body; alongside Leopold Bloom, he can be ranked as one of the “‘old school’ beach flâneurs” (25), and secret voyeurs. From this perspective, the source of his disapproval can be located in nostalgia for the pre-war past; however, Poirot’s discomfort also resonates with a more elaborate criticism of the seaside pervasive in the nineteen-thirties, coming both from conservative elites and from the left. As Gary S. Cross and John K. Walton note in a comparative study of Coney Island and Blackpool, it was precisely the mass tourist resort, and in particular the “playful crowd,” that provoked the most ambivalent feelings and the most trenchant criticism:

Many middle-class people did not want to be “touched” even in a crowd and many feared the release of inhibition—even as many also were fascinated by the mystery and energy of the throng. Blackpool and Coney Island excited anxiety, disgust, superiority, patronizing amusement, and even curious admiration from middle-class and intellectual witnesses. (Cross and Walton 7)

At the seaside, crowds appeared even more threatening because they were released from the restrictions of the workplace, and because they were linked to the seaside resort’s liminal status, “neither land nor sea, a ‘place on the margin’ where the usual constraints on respectability and decorum in public behaviour might be pushed aside in the interests of holiday hedonism, and of carnivalesque escape from the petty restrictions of everyday life in displays of excess” (Walton, *British Seaside* 96). If the bourgeoisie felt threatened by the defiance of authority embodied in this carnivalesque crowd, critics on the left were equally dismayed by the alleged hedonism, purposelessness, and lack of taste (for “romantic” nature, for example) of the working class at play. Places like Blackpool, traditionally frequented by factory workers from the Lancashire cotton towns (Walton, *British Seaside* 51), were of particular interest for large-scale sociological studies of the working class, such as the study conducted by the research group Mass-Observation in 1937 and 1938.⁴ Partly, 1930s writers evinced anxiety about gender trouble, about the emasculation of the male English worker that seemed to accompany the greater autonomy of female seaside visitors, an enervation apparently at odds with the observed “energy of the throng.” For instance, in J. B. Priestley’s *English Journey*, the old Blackpool, “the Mecca of a vulgar but alert and virile democracy,” had been eroded and emasculated by a new, Americanized entertainment culture, represented by Hollywood cinema and the blues, or in his words, “weary negroid ditties” (268). During the years in which the United Kingdom faced the threat of fascism, the seaside became a site

where ideas of Englishness, popular culture, and masculinity came under scrutiny in a series of travelogues, connecting journeys through England with an assessment of the state of the nation.

English Journeys

In 1934, the writer, journalist, and communist activist Yvonne Cloud (pen name of Yvonne Kapp) was commissioned to edit a collection of six essays on English seaside resorts, each dedicated to a selected place. The contributors, all of them well-known writers at the time, included Kate O'Brian on Southend, Antonia White on Brighton, Malcolm Muggeridge on Bournemouth, James Laver on Blackpool, V. S. Pritchett on Scarborough, and Cloud herself on Margate. The aim of *Beside the Seaside* was, as Cloud states in her introduction, to present a more differentiated view of the English seaside than the prevalent "vague, undifferentiated impression of seashores blackened with *hoi polloi*, of uncouth music and more uncouth voices, of stickiness, squalor, vulgarity and discomfort, supposed to be enjoyed by what is called 'the masses,' and undistinguished, as indistinguishable, from each other, by any individual character" ("Point of Departure" 1). The authors' sympathies clearly lie with the *hoi polloi*, and while each contribution differs widely in style and focus—for instance, a large section of White's "Brighton" is dedicated to the city's past, whereas others keep their eye on the present,—an attention to class as well as a positive assessment of the playful crowd form common points of departure. In Cloud's words, "the 'holiday mood,' which is constitutive of the special atmosphere of seaside resorts, "could not have been generated by the leisured class: it implies expansive and positive relaxation; something in contrast with fixed and daily labour, and, as a mass rather than an individual mood, was expressed most fully by the flamboyant energy of a class which, for the first time in its history, was able to translate its dreams into reality" ("Point of Departure" 18-19). The working classes here are

regarded as the true founders of the modern seaside resort, and their gathering in unprecedentedly large numbers with the aim of enjoying themselves is not seen as a degeneration into mass consumerism, but as the source of “flamboyant energy.”

Interestingly, the chapter on Blackpool, where one would expect the most extended descriptions of crowds in the resort’s famous pleasure grounds, begins with a long, lyrical depiction of Blackpool sands, and of the sea as a powerful and sublime presence (Laver 149-52). It is as if the author were trying to reclaim Blackpool from the accusation of tawdriness by emphasising its magnificent natural features, before going on to enumerate the many outdoor and indoor attractions: the Tower, the Big Wheel, the pleasure piers, grottoes, theaters and cinemas (159-68).⁵ When it comes to speaking of Blackpool’s visitors, Laver emphasizes the regional origin of the majority (179), and, importantly, their good health and wholesomeness:

The men are strong and well built, and when they strip for bathing show the sturdy, solid physique which proved the backbone of the Lancashire regiments during the Great War. The vast majority of them strangely belie the sentimental picture of the man from the factory. The girls belie it even more completely, and the stranger is left wondering how the cotton towns could have produced such a collection of shapely limbs and rosy cheeks. But if their cheeks are rosy that is probably due chiefly to the fact that they manage to come to Blackpool every year. (180)

This is, as will be discussed below, in striking contrast to Priestley’s view of the Blackpool crowds. Laver presents Blackpool not as a site of cultural and racial degeneration, but on the contrary, as a source of health, where the one week of annual holidays succeeds in counterbalancing the harmful impact of fifty-one weeks of factory work. At a time when

eugenics had gained wide acceptance even in modernist intellectual circles (see Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics*), the emphasis on the male factory workers' "sturdy, solid physique" and the women's rosiness formed an important counter-argument against the accusation that Blackpool's amusements were unnatural, un-English, and debilitating.

All the contributions to *Beside the Seaside* emphasize the predominance of the crowd in the public space of the selected seaside resorts, but they carefully elaborate on the differences. If the crowd at Blackpool is vigorous and healthy, the more affluent visitors of Bournemouth form a "sedate and unribald" crowd (Muggeridge 108). Whereas the promenades are as crammed—"black with moving people" (108)—as elsewhere, the tranquil behaviour of the middle class ensures that "Bournemouth is restful" (108), and even has an "autumnal flavour," (117) which forms precisely its attraction for the affluent vacationers and residents: "The noisy joviality of other seaside resorts would have oppressed their spirits. They could never have tolerated the animality of a place like Margate, the indecorum of a place like Brighton, the exuberance of a place like Blackpool" (117).

While Muggeridge discovers a quiet charm in Bournemouth, for other contributors it is precisely the "animality," "exuberance," and even "indecorum" of popular seaside resorts that they find interesting. In her chapter on Southend, Kate O'Brian emphasizes congestion, noise, the absence of prandial and sexual inhibitions, but also the liveliness and good temper of the crowd: "The noise and light are violent; beyond the white pier-gates the crowd grows livelier each minute. Everyone eats or drinks or kisses his girl as he moves about. A thousand traffic-accidents are avoided only through a miracle of mass good temper. . . . It is a fine sight, a fine mood—of comfort, kindness, *laissez aller*" (30). In particular, O'Brian stresses the agency of the young working women visiting Southend, who not only allow themselves to be kissed, but also use their wages to dress up and put on "dazzling and decorative" makeup, following the example of movie actresses (49). The feminist writer O'Brian does not frown

upon the conspicuous looks and independent behaviour of these women; on the contrary, they are the ones who add energy and harmony to the crowd, transforming the throng into “a long delightful ballet of feminine beauty” (50).

With all the differences due to the diverse setting, clientele, and atmosphere of the six places visited, the contributors to *Beside the Seaside* paint a positive picture of English seaside resorts in the nineteen-thirties. They are important sites of recreation, pleasure, as well as—despite varying degrees of exclusiveness—of a democratic culture that allows members of different classes access to at least a limited period of self-determined living. The crowd, rather than effacing individuality, enables new modes of self-fashioning, not least to women. As Yvonne Cloud concludes in her final chapter on Margate, “[e]veryone goes to the seaside for enjoyment, and everyone finds it” (258). Malaise about the behavior of the seaside crowds lies in the eye of the beholders, be they middle-class defenders of decorum or left-wing activists who deplore the crowd’s lack of political awareness and organisation:

When Margate is mentioned to some people, they experience an authentic *frisson d’horreur*: they know they do not like Margate and that is why they do not go there. They have the very strongest feeling that when masses of people less sensitive and cultivated than themselves are on holiday, they are merely objectionable, however interesting as a class and perhaps the hope of society as long as they remain at work. . . . The Margate crowds in full swing are disorganised, individualistic and lack class-consciousness. The vigour of their enjoyment might be the despair of an onlooker, they seem so unaware of being the victims of a rotten system; on aesthetic grounds, the sounds of their loud pleasure might repel him and their very numbers appal him: he must just look the other way. It is not for him. (259-60)

Even if the crowds at places like Blackpool, Southend, or Margate can be found aesthetically and politically offensive, Cloud underscores the value of “loud pleasure,” as well as the sheer relief from the exhausting grind in the rest of the year, which the seaside offers to working class visitors even more than to others.

The positive assessment of English seaside resorts in *Beside the Seaside* is preponderantly shared by Ivor Brown in *The Heart of England* (1935). In his chapter on “Seaport and Seaside,” he agrees that the “contribution of the seaside town, new or old, to English health and happiness is enormous;” in fact, the resorts, while located at the external boundaries of the British Isles, “England’s blue and pleasant sleeve,” keep “the heart of England, beating warm and sound” (21). Again, Englishness is at stake in the health of individual bodies and of the body politic. Nevertheless, Brown’s description of Blackpool is strikingly different from Laver’s. Whereas Laver stresses the natural beauty of the beach and sea, Brown calls Blackpool’s artificiality “total”; to him it is not an organically grown community, but “a terrific mechanical contrivance for the supply of pleasure” (19). The resort attracts so many visitors precisely because of its complete commodification: “Blackpool, without a single advantage of natural scenery, has set out to make itself saleable and then to sell itself. It is an honest-to-goodness proposition, the bargain-counter of the holiday emporium, where the trade is terrific because the bargains are genuine” (20). Even if Blackpool is a “concrete Babylon,” it is somehow healthy and clean, and offers good value for money “for the likely plebeian customer, not for the frowning aesthetes and fussy gourmets” (20).

In his foreword to *The Heart of England*, J. B. Priestley accuses Brown of a too optimistic outlook on “this new standardised Suburbia” and “this Americanised urban life,” which he finds typical of 1930s England (vi). In his own *English Journey* (1934), Priestley extends this assessment of contemporary English culture to Blackpool, which he also finds

“mechanised,” “standardised,” and “Americanised” (267). Priestley chooses to visit Blackpool in November, when the usual crowds are absent and the amusement park presents a particularly bleak view. However, it is in this deserted place that the meretricious attractions of the summer season subside, and the suppressed natural side comes to the fore:

Nobody was demonstrating, with voice, piano and saxophone, the *Season's Hot Successes*. Nobody was cooking or enjoying or touting for those *Nice Hot Dinners*. There was, in short, nothing hot left. All was chill and wet but gloriously fresh. The three piers had done with frivolity for this year and were now engaged in their proper stern task of holding up against the dark raging sea. There was only a glimmer of light from the famous tower, and the great wheel was gone for ever. Nobody was suggesting a nice hour's sail. I was not asked to buy anything along the whole length of the promenade. Blackpool the resort was dead, and even the residential town, which is of a considerable size, was moribund. Only the weather was awake, and that was tremendously alive. The sea roared in the deep dusk and sent sheets of spray over the glistening wet railings and seats. And this was, for the time being, all the Blackpool I wanted. (264, emphases in the original)

By visiting Blackpool at the most unpleasant moment available within the calendar year, Priestley repudiates the “frivolity” of modern summer holidays, with their sun worship, relaxation, and comfort. It is *good* that Blackpool is wet, cold, and dismal. His timing is tantamount to a return to the older tradition of seaside stays in winter, with exposure to cold sea water and bracing air. As Lara Feigel observes, “Priestley divides British seaside resorts into two types, the picturesque and the vulgar, and splits the holidaymakers along the same lines” (23). By walking along the storm-shaken promenade, Priestley not only restores its lost

picturesqueness, or rather the sublimity of “the dark raging sea,” to vulgar Blackpool, but absorbs the attributes of raw, stern, glorious nature, and thus positions himself as similarly vigorous and alive, in contrast to the now absent crowd coddled by hot food and hot entertainment.

Visitors to the “new Blackpool” are not only vulgar, but also “less intelligent and enterprising,” as well as “passive and listless,” in contrast to the “vital beings who burst out of their factories for the annual spree as if the boilers had exploded and blown them out,” who came to “the energetic old Blackpool” before the First World War (Priestley 267). These pre-war visitors came from the same factory towns as those following in their footsteps, but their working-class culture, equally vulgar as it may have been, was still unadulterated by American influences:

[T]hey had enjoyed, rapturously enjoyed, their Blackpool, and had never once insulted its breezy majesty by singing about their ‘blues.’ In those days you did not sing the woes of distant negroes, probably reduced to such misery by too much gin or cocaine. You sang about dear old Charlie Brown and his pals, and the girls, those with the curly curls. These songs were nonsense too, but they were our own silly innocent nonsense and not another country’s jaded weary nonsense; they had a fresh lilting quality, and expressed high spirits not low spirits. The Blackpool that sang about Charlie Brown and the girls with their curly curls was the Mecca of a vulgar but alert and virile democracy. I am not so sure about the new Blackpool of the weary negroid ditties. It would not be difficult, I feel, to impose an autocracy upon young people who sounded as tired as that. Fortunately, there are other young people who do not come this way at all, but go climbing on to the moors, into the sun, and they may have their own ideas about politics just as they apparently have about holidays. (268)

This passage, to which I have already referred above, merits quoting at full length as it encapsulates what is really at stake, not only in Priestley's Blackpool chapter, but in *English Journey* as a whole. One should bear in mind that Priestley's travels through England took place in 1933, the year in which Hitler seized power in Germany; it was also a time when certain sectors of the British industry were still in the grip of the Great Depression. Priestley's main concern is to assess the state of British democracy, its ability to defend itself against the spread of fascism in Europe, but also within the country. This defensiveness depends, to a large extent, on the physical and mental strength of its citizens, which in turn is closely connected to the vitality of a native popular culture. Throughout *English Journey*, Priestley deplores the disappearance of the traditional ways of popular entertainment, especially that of the music hall, and its displacement by the "American" art form of the cinema.⁶ He associates "the vast new picture theatres" that spring up everywhere, but in particularly great numbers at seaside resorts, with a decadence that is caused by the "over-done comfort" they offer, as well as by their internationally uniform programme; "the proletariat" who patronize the cinema, instead of actively participating in the production of culture, are seduced into "[sinking] away into a deep sea of plush" (4). It is against this debilitating sea of plush that Priestley sets "the dark raging sea" of wintry Blackpool.

Priestley's vantage point is not that of a middle-class aesthete who is offended by the vulgarity of the working class at play, but that of a political observer. As John Brannigan argues, Priestley considers Blackpool "[not as] a retreat from the industrial metropolis, but a foray into the juxtaposed location of modernity" (211-12), a modernity marked by the internationalization of culture. The silliness of the songs sung by the old Blackpoolers does not disturb him, as long as they are "our own silly innocent nonsense" and expressive of "high spirits not low spirits." Vulgarity, in other words, is all right as long as it is rooted in a

vibrant local tradition. Priestley's diatribe against "weary negroid ditties" reads terribly racist today, as well as ignorant of African-American history and grossly philistine about the blues.⁷ For him, though, these imported songs are a symptom of the deplored internationalization and of weariness, that is, they represent a threat to the old English "vulgar but alert and virile democracy." Blackpool's Americanization thus signifies a loss of virility, in effect, the castration of John Bull. Other observers of the political situation in the nineteen-thirties, such as Philip Gibbs, would later comment on Nazi Germany's cult of physical prowess: "[v]isitors to Germany were impressed by the physical splendour of German youth, by those endless parades of young men and boys under the banners of the Swastika. They were impressed—and frightened" (161). In 1933, Priestley is worried that the tired young men would not be able to withstand the threat against democracy; instead of coddling them at the cinema and the seaside, he would send them on invigorating walking-tours "on to the moors, into the sun." In the end, then, Priestley turns away from the seaside; in contrast to the writings by Cloud, O'Brian, Brown and others, for him it is not a site where democracy and emancipation (of the working class, as well as of women) are practiced, but where they are undermined.

Conclusion

Different writers in the nineteen-thirties agree that the seaside holiday had become an English institution. With the exception of the unemployed and the very poor, almost everybody had access to at least short seaside vacations. Despite, or perhaps because of, this democratization of the seaside, the authors studied in this essay also express a degree of unease about those features that connected seaside resorts to urban modernity: the leveling of local cultures, the standardization of places, bodies, and practices, the overcrowding, congestion, and high prices that mass tourism brought along. This unease was crystallized in reflections about the playful crowd which came in for critique from the right and the left. The

crowd is ambivalent, as Lara Feigel suggests: “the seaside crowd could be a welcoming hub that allowed each individual to find a home, or a de-individuating mob that denied culture and sensitivity” (17). Between home and mob, the crowd could be interpreted as a catalyst of emancipation and hence, the backbone of democracy; or it could be seen as a corrosive, uncontrollable force that destabilized the very democracy that was its nutrient medium.

Situated between land and sea, seaside resorts are topographically and culturally liminal; the usual restrictions of the workplace are suspended, and the visitors are free to play, to revel, or to do nothing. The decency rules that had dominated the seaside experience in the nineteenth century were considerably relaxed after the First World War. However, as John Brannigan points out, the notion that the seaside is a site “where social and sexual regulation is suspended” is a fiction that serves “the construction of a normative political subjectivity. Hegemonic constructions of gender, race, nation, sexuality, and class are reinforced, perhaps even amplified, at the coastline” (212). This becomes particularly obvious in the indirect exchange between Laver, Brown, and Priestley about Blackpool. Laver emphasizes the importance of Blackpool’s natural topography, and its locally rooted pleasure business. Although Blackpool is commodified, it is not fundamentally unsound, as testified by the physical health and beauty of the visitors from the region. Importantly, the sturdiness of the Lancastrian factory workers is connected to their ability to defend the country. By contrast, both Brown and Priestley see Blackpool as utterly artificial. Yet, whereas for Brown this is part of an altogether positive assessment of modern life in England, for Priestley it points to a vital crisis of the country. The debilitation, especially, of the male mind and body, which manifests itself in a predilection for American entertainment, and thus poses a threat to Englishness, is exemplified by Blackpool’s commercial, mechanical, standardized pleasure business. Here, Priestley diagnoses a threat to English democracy, which he conceives as essentially masculine. His own narrative strategy in face of this threat is to reinstitute sublime

nature and to erase the crowd by visiting Blackpool when it is empty: he exchanges the American blues, the sign of enervation, for good old English bad weather. This, however, is a rather perverse gesture. Perhaps the polyvalence of the modern seaside resort is better captured in the travel reports by Yvonne Cloud and Kate O'Brian, who celebrate the exuberance of the seaside crowd, and the space it creates for female agency, without denying that the individualism expressed at seaside resorts is part of a modernist mass culture.

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Notes

¹ It is estimated that in the late nineteen-thirties, “15 million people, around one-third of the population” took a holiday of at least one week; the biggest seaside resorts, Blackpool and Southend, boasted, respectively, 7 and 5.5 million visitors annually, including day trippers (Walton, *British Seaside* 58).

² On the decline of the bathing machine in the first half of the twentieth century, see Walton, *British Seaside* 98, Cross and Walton 18, Braggs and Harris 58. On the development of swimwear from a Victorian lady's full body covering to the serviceable, sleeveless (and practically unisex) one-piece bathing costume made of machine-knitted wool adopted from the mid-1920s onwards, see Braggs and Harris 58, Urbain 99-105. On the history of British seaside spas, from the discovery of a mineral spring at Scarborough in 1627 to the twentieth century, see Hern; Walton, *English Seaside Resort*; Walvin.

³ For a *locus classicus* of this urban conception of modernity, see Berman.

⁴ Mass-Observation was a collective of researchers and volunteers formed in 1937 under the leadership of Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson. Their greatest project was the twin study of the working class of Bolton (“Worktown”) in the Greater Manchester area, and of Blackpool, the main holiday destination of these workers in summer, especially during the traditional Wakes week. Only one of their originally planned four volumes of research was published at the time, but the material pertinent for Blackpool has since been edited by Gary Cross.

⁵ As Cross and Walton claim, “Blackpool’s beach became less central to its identity and attractiveness as the years went by;” instead, from the 1870s onwards, the resort’s attraction consisted mainly of its “unprecedented and unparalleled array of indoor attractions in its ‘palaces of pleasure,’ solidly built of brick, stone, steel and glass, which soon became more important than the beach in defining the town’s identity” (18).

⁶ Once more, Priestley’s and Brown’s views are diametrically opposed. Brown also sees a “levelling force” in the cinema, but in a much more positive way. The cheap ticket prices allowed even the poorest to sit in “a comfortable seat and approach it over carpets without pauper-status” (4). Philip Gibbs, on the other hand, saw the cinema as one of the modern vehicles to “mass excitement and mass hysteria” (13).

⁷ Priestley’s position regarding nationalism, racism, and xenophobia was much more complex than what I can present here. He advocated the intake of refugees from Germany, defended children with mixed-race parentage in Liverpool against racist denigration, but, at the same time, accused the Irish of “ignorance and dirt and drunkenness and disease” (248). For a fuller assessment of Priestley’s politics, see Baxendale.

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